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PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #2326/01 2081123
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 261123Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8508
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002326

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/22/2018
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PAPAL NUNCIO ASSESSES FEASIBILITY OF RESTORING
BAGHDAD CHURCHES, SEMINARIES

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Classified By: By Political Counselor Robert Ford for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Embassy and 1BCT (Brigade Combat Team)/4ID - ePRT Baghdad-1 facilitated a joint visit with Papal Nuncio Archbishop Francis Chullikatt on July 22 to explore the condition of Chaldean and other Church facilities in Baghdad's Doura neighborhood. The Nuncio's primary purpose was to assess the feasibility of restoring and reopening Baghdad-based seminaries and draw back seminarians who were forced during 2006 sectarian violence to flee to a temporary facility in the vicinity of Erbil. Over the past few months the security situation has significantly improved, allowing three of a total of seven Doura churches to reopen and hold services, while Christian residents are gradually returning to their homes. Chullikatt, who had been unable to visit the Doura neighborhood until now, commented he could now report firsthand to his superiors in the Vatican of the situation of several of Baghdad's key Christian religious sites, rather than rely on hearsay. Chullikatt said he would recommend that a Church representative take up residence in the near future at Babel College, a key site that Chullikatt is keen to restore and reopen and where U.S. soldiers have lived since seminarians departed in 2006. The Church representative could catalogue the library, inventory the premises and prepare for eventual transition to seminary use. The Nuncio also sought Embassy assistance in intervening with Iraqi authorities to grant an Iraqi residency permit for the Latin Rite Bishop, a Lebanese who has been serving in Baghdad for five years without proper status. END SUMMARY.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR BABEL COLLEGE

2. (C) On July 22, Papal Nuncio Archbishop Francis Assisi Chullikat and Emboffs, visited Pontificate Babel College (Muhalla (M) 860) and the adjacent St Peter's and Paul's Major Seminary (M834). 1BCT4ID and ePRT Baghdad-1 advanced the visit and provided transportation and security. While many areas of the College and Seminary are in disrepair, major vandalism and looting has not taken place. The College has been used by U.S. soldiers as living/working space since the College closed and seminarians departed in 2006. Church authorities made those decisions in response to the kidnapping of some of the staff's priests, including the Rector (who was subsequently released). The institution eventually relocated to Ankawa, a Christian village outside Erbil (Kurdistan), with 23 seminarians currently enrolled, according to Chullikatt. The Nuncio's hope is to rehabilitate the neglected facilities and resume clerical training and other church functions at Babel College; Chullikatt stated that Babel College could serve Catholics of all rites - Chaldean, Assyrian, Latin, and Armenian - as a

postgraduate theological institution. By coincidence, Chullikatt was to meet the Rector of Babel College later in the afternoon, and indicated he would propose that the rector engage with the BCT and ePRT on transition arrangements.

¶3. (C) The local U.S. battalion commander (7-10 CAV) told the visitors that when the neighborhood experienced Sunni-Shia clashes in 2006, many area residents fled, but some, including some Christians, were now returning. He anticipated returns would accelerate over the summer in advance of the school year. The 1BCT4ID Commander (COL Martin) and ePRT team leader noted that Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Emmanuel Delly had visited them at FOB Falcon on July 12. Delly reportedly had indicated he would like to resume seminary functions at Babel College, but could not ask the U.S. military to go away (and leave the church facilities without security). Looking at the Babel College facilities with Chullikatt on July 22, COL Martin suggested and Chullikatt agreed that the military would set up a working and living space for a Church representative adjacent to the College library. A priest or sister could come in the near future to catalogue library holdings, inventory the premises, identify repairs needed (which the U.S. Army would undertake), and otherwise prepare for a transition to resumption of seminary functions.

SEMINARIES THAT LACK NOTHING BUT STUDENTS

¶4. (C) Adjacent to Babel College is St. Peter's Major Seminary, which at one time had over 30 priests and seminarians in residence, but which has been closed since ¶2006. The compound and seminarians' living quarters, although covered with layers of dust, are in generally good

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shape. Chullikatt noted that reopening Babel College would enable lecturers and staff from outside Iraq to teach there. The next stop was Marc Antonius Chaldean Seminary (M810), which is also in a reasonably good state of repair. Father Feras, a Chaldean clergyman, has been providing services to the Chaldean Christian community in Doura. He has also visited Hillah to celebrate religious services for its approximately fifty Christian families. (Note: According to Chullikatt, there are currently 13 Chaldean Catholic priests in Baghdad, and six or seven Assyrian Catholic priests. End note.) Fr. Feras, who has been in regular contact with Chullikatt, holds Mass at the Chaldean Seminary and nearby St. John's Chaldean Church in Doura.

ST JOHN'S CHALDEAN CHURCH

¶5. (C) The last stop was St John's Chaldean Church, which closed due to violence in 2003, but reopened in late 2007, with a mass celebrated by Chaldean Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni and attended by both Christians and Muslims. Since then the Church has conducted services every week, as well as on key religious holidays. There was a first communion for 10 people two weeks ago and the church is clean and well-maintained by any standard.

NUNCIO SEEKS ASSISTANCE WITH VISAS FOR LATIN RITE BISHOP

¶6. (C) The Nuncio pulled aside Deputy PolCouns both at the start and close of the day trip to request USG intervention with the GOI to obtain a residency permit for Latin Rite Bishop Jean Benjamin Sleiman. Chullikat said Sleiman has been in Iraq for the last five years, but the GOI has refused, despite repeated requests, to grant a residency permit. Sleiman, who is Lebanese, has been a visa overstay, according to Chullikat. The Nuncio added he had provided

Sleiman with a Vatican laissez-passer in hopes this would somewhat mitigate the precariousness of his status. The Nuncio further commented that correcting Bishop Sleiman,s situation would allow him to more fully exercise his liturgical functions as a peer to the Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Delly.

COMMENT

17. (C) Archbishop Chullikatt took away the impression that both security and the physical condition of Church properties in Doura are better than represented in many reports. However, achieving an even higher level of security requires sustained progress and effort. Impressions we were able to sample, e.g. from church caretakers, suggest a high degree of acceptance for Christians and Christian returnees. END COMMENT.

CROCKER